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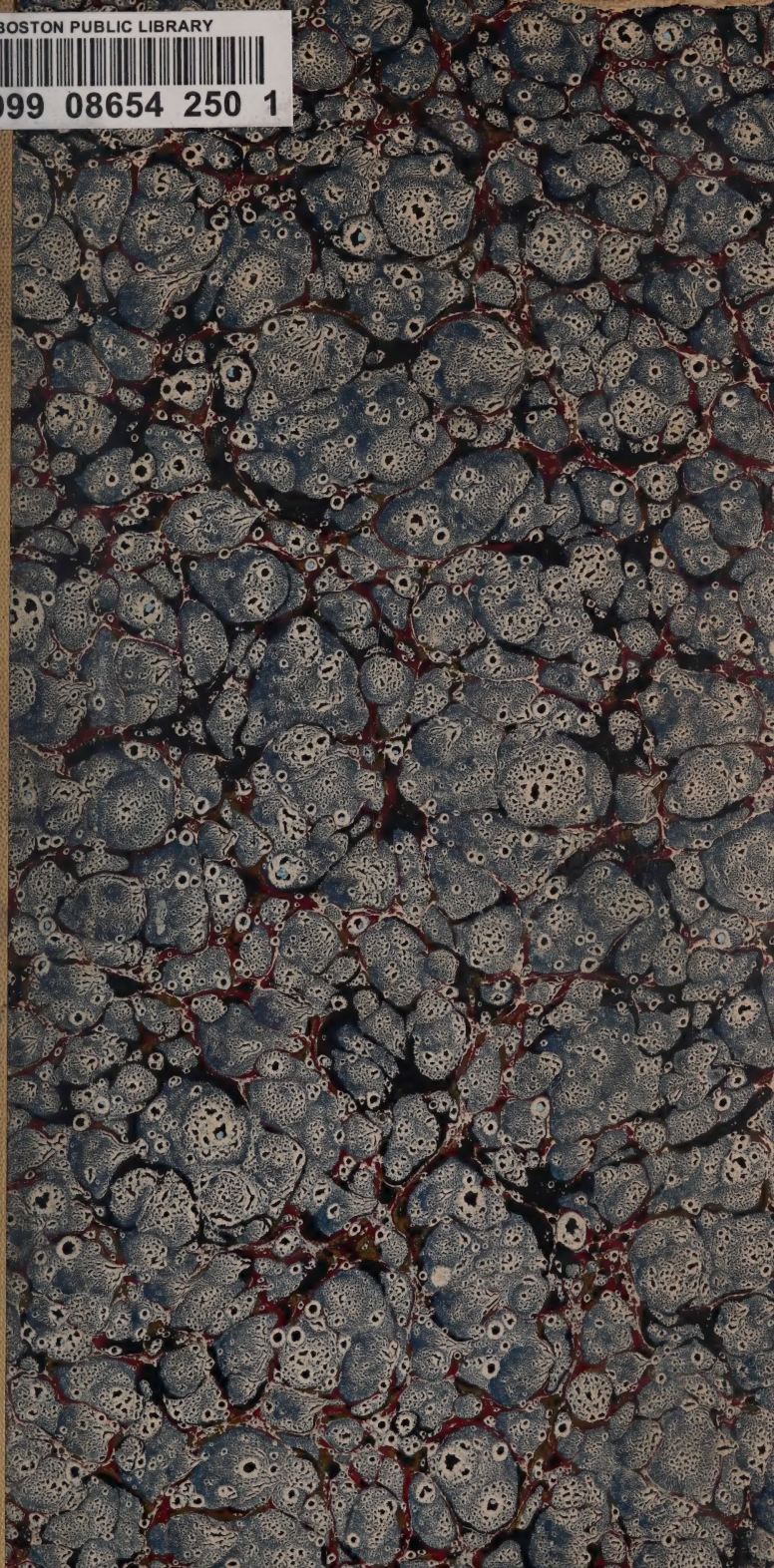

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LETTER

TO

EMORY WASHBURN, WM. M. ROGERS,

AND SEVENTY EIGHT OTHERS,

DISSENTIENTS FROM THE RESOLUTION

TOUCHING POLITICAL ACTION,

ADOPTED AT THE STATE TEMPERANCE CONVENTION.

BY R. HILDRETH,

CORRESPONDING SECRETARY OF THE MORAL SUASION TEMPERANCE SOCIETY.

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LETTER.

GENTLEMEN,

The late Temperance Convention held at Boston, on the 12th and 13th of February last, after a long and warm debate, adopted the following resolution:—

Resolved, That until the laws of this State concerning the sale of intoxicating liquors, are fully and firmly established upon the *basis of prohibition*, and maintained by a correct general sentiment like the other penal laws of the Commonwealth, it is, in our opinion, the duty of Temperance men to vote only for those men as candidates for legislative and executive offices, who are known and inflexible friends to *such a course of legislation.*

This resolution, in all its forms, both as originally proposed, and as finally amended, encountered from first to last, your decided and active opposition. Not content with speaking against it, nor with voting against it, some of you saw fit to make a remarkable exhibition of your disappointment and chagrin at its passage, and all of you have chosen to record your names in the negative, in a list annexed to the Convention's published proceedings.

As some of you have heretofore played a part, more or less conspicuous, among the advocates and leaders of the Temperance Reform, and as that circumstance may give your opinion a certain degree of weight with the community, it is a duty which I owe to the true friends of Temperance, who sustained

that Resolution by an overwhelming vote, to exhibit the sound reasons upon which they acted, and to expose the empty and futile objections which you urged against it. The rule adopted by the Convention, which limited each speaker to ten minutes, prevented me from fully answering you on the spot, and must serve as an apology for this printed letter. I esteem it my duty to justify the Resolution because it was at my suggestion, and by my procurement, that the Convention was called; and because in passing that resolution, the Convention did precisely what I wished and expected.

It is an observation of Bishop Burnet,—and the bishop was a shrewd observer of men and things—that the ostensible reasons of men's conduct, the reasons they judge fit to offer to the public, are not always their real reasons, their true reasons. Whether this remark be applicable, or not, to any of you, I shall not now stop to enquire. I shall assume, for the purposes of this letter, that your ostensible reasons were your true ones; and I shall proceed to weigh those reasons in the balance of truth and common sense.

After a careful examination of the several speeches made against the resolution, all the reasons of all the speakers, seem to subside and coalesce into one; and that one is, that to pass the Resolution would tend to introduce temperance into politics, an event which you all seemed to look upon with terror and alarm, as certain to prove fatal to the Temperance cause.

I admit the tendency of the Resolution to be precisely such as you describe it. Beyond all doubt, the passage of that Resolution, did, and will, tend to introduce Temperance into politics; and it is in that very tendency that I discover, and the Convention discovered, the chief power and virtue of that Resolution.

You seem to assume it as a settled matter, that politics are something base, corrupt and degrading, and

that any moral enterprise coming into contact with politics, or being connected in any way with political parties or questions, must by reason of such connection, be speedily degraded and certainly lost. According to your view, politics and morals are not only distinct and separate, they are incompatible, they are hostile.

Such doctrine might be appropriate enough in the mouths of hireling sophists, the base tools of some despotic prince, employed to fill the minds of the people with vain terrors, and to frighten them from attempting or wishing to participate in public affairs; but I little expected to hear it from free citizens, the free citizens of a republican, a democratic Commonwealth. The emperor of Austria, out of his paternal regard for his subjects, causes from time to time, to be distributed among them, some pathetic accounts of the corrupt and corrupting politics of republican America. But even those Austrian diatribes do not go the length that you do; you, who declare that under our form of government, morality and politics are incompatible, and that the attempt to vindicate a moral principle at the polls, must be fatal to that principle. No hater of republicanism ever ventured before, so sweeping a reproach against popular government. If it be true, as you take for granted, that an attempt to vote morally, is certain to be fatal to every moral enterprise in behalf of which such votes may be given, it of necessity follows, that the citizens of every popular state are reduced to the unhappy dilemma of disregarding at the polls all moral considerations, as a means of showing their friendship to morality! A strange means truly!

No, gentlemen, the absurdity of your position is too apparent to demand, or to admit of, an argument. The proposition you have undertaken to defend, when stated in plain English, is neither more nor less than this,—that if men act according to the moral principles which they profess to maintain, such a course of

conduct will prevent the spread and the triumph of those principles! With whomsoever such a proposition may find favor, or by whomsoever it may be advocated, most certain I am that it never can pass current, either for common honesty or common sense, with the plain citizens of this Commonwealth.

The grog shops are too strong for us, says one of your orators, "one bar-room and one grog-shop, with the votes they can carry, will effect what a hundred temperance men cannot do. We cannot compete with them."* No, truly, we cannot compete with them; and we never shall be able to, so long as the grog-shops act firmly together upon a regular and consistent plan, resolved to sacrifice for that cause all other interests, while the temperance men, scattered, broken, disheartened, without firmness, decision, or confidence in each other, attempt to carry on a mere guerrilla contest, single handed and separate, against disciplined cohorts and enlisted regiments. "We cannot compete with them." Indeed, we cannot! One grog-shop with its hundred retainers acting firmly and promptly together, is more than a match for five hundred or a thousand of your timid, quavering, wavering temperance men, who cannot make up their minds to carry Temperance to the polls, and who esteem it their duty and glory to look on—and wait, with "love, hope and patience" for their motto. Love, hope and patience! Sacred words most shamefully abused. The only love worth having, is the love that acts; and that patience is contemptible which submits to an evil one moment longer than is absolutely necessary. No wonder that the grog-shops are more than a match for us, —and if your quietist doctrine of *political non-resistance* is going to prevail, they are like to continue so, for a century to come. If these be your sober opinions, gentlemen dissentients, I see no good reason, why you should not be one and all forthwith voted in, active, or

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* Mr. Washburn's speech, p. 10 of the *Proceedings of the Convention*.

rather *passive*, members of the Non-Resistance Society. Certainly your doctrine stops nothing short of the entire length of that odd theory.

The grog-shops are too strong for us. "One bar-room and one grog-shop, with the votes they can carry, will effect what a hundred temperance men cannot do." There is a lion in the path,—let us tarry at home, and keep out of harm's way. Such is the advice which cowardice is always whispering into imbecility's ear. "We cannot compete with them. And what will be the consequence? The cause of Temperance will be identified with a political party, and if our candidate happens to be unpopular, the party goes down, and the cause of temperance goes down with it."

So it seems then, that no question of any interest to anybody, or of any consequence to anybody, ought to be carried into politics, lest, having an unpopular candidate, the party should go down, and the cause along with it. A most comprehensive argument indeed, —a general excuse for all kinds of poltroonery; an excellent apology for never doing anything. Not Falstaff himself could have skulked more ingeniously.

Permit me, gentlemen, to observe, that in this Commonwealth, the election of candidates to public office, depends very slightly upon personal popularity. We vote for a man or against him, not because we like or dislike the man, but because he is the representative of certain opinions; because he is the Whig or the Administration candidate. I have known many men absolutely destitute of all personal popularity, carried into office by most triumphant votes because they belonged to a particular party. I never yet knew in this Commonwealth or anywhere else, a party ruined, or even essentially injured, by the personal unpopularity of any of its candidates. The most unpopular candidates are always those, made so by the kind of principles they espouse. Upon what is party opposition to Mr. Van Buren, or to General Harrison founded? Is it upon personal qualities?—or is it

upon the political principles which they are respectively supposed to represent? Let us not be disturbed then by any puerile fears, that in voting for temperance candidates we run the risk of doing damage to the Temperance cause. We are much more likely to damage that cause by forgetting our Temperance for the sake of something else, by talking Temperance, and choosing rum men to legislate.

It is said that by carrying Temperance into politics we give demagogues an opportunity to use that cause for selfish purposes of their own, and to turn it into a mere means of exalting themselves into office. "The result of it would be," says the Reverend Mr. Rogers,* "to collect all the drift wood floating in the sea of politics—all the small politicians who are seeking for the loaves and fishes."

The Reverend Mr. Rogers puts up his thanks with a self-complacency truly pharisaic,—Lord, I thank thee that I am not as other men,—a piece of drift wood, a small politician. If politicians begin to talk Temperance, there must be an end, says the Reverend Mr. Rogers, of preaching Temperance from the pulpit. Why? If the profane laity give their support to a cause, is that a sufficient reason why the clergy should abandon it, however good the cause may be? Has it come to this, that we cannot serve God though the devil bid us? For my part I prefer the doctrine of St. Paul. St. Paul was content that the gospel should be preached even though it were preached out of envy and strife; and I am content that Temperance be promoted, even though it be promoted for selfish ends.

If Temperance men carried their principles to the polls, the result, the Reverend Mr. Rogers assures us, would be, that "when in a majority, they would become the dupe of designing men, and when in a minority, they would be sold to the highest bidder."

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* Speech of the Rev. Mr. Rogers. *Proceedings*, p. 15.

It may perhaps admit of some question, whether the friends of Temperance, as things now stand, have not already been the dupes of designing men; and the question may be asked with a pertinency still greater, whether the Temperance cause is not at this moment in danger of being sold out to the highest bidder? Are not certain legal and clerical gentlemen, members of both the political parties, all ready, hammer in hand, to play the part of auctioneers, and to *knock down* Temperance forever, or at least to sell it into temporary servitude, lest it prove an obstacle in the way of political schemes?

After all the abuse heaped upon politicians,—of which but a very small part appears in the printed *Proceedings*,—let me take the liberty to observe, that politicians after all are men, like the rest of us; and if not better men, perhaps, not much worse. They act in the blaze of day, in the clear light of general attention. The rays of publicity thus concentrated on them, operate with a microscopic power, and show all their blemishes as clear and distinct as Gulliver saw the moles and freckles of the Brobdinagian beauties. On the other hand, men in private life, seen but obscurely, shrink into Lilleputian littleness. They appear irreproachable because they are not known. But bring them forward, and subject them to the scrutiny of a public investigation, made too by opponents eager to discover all the weak places of their conduct, and how would our lawyers, how would our clergy, how would our merchants come out of such a trial? The mean and fraudulent wranglings of the law, the hypocricy and the craftiness of the church, the tricks of trade, all brought out and exposed to view, I fear the world would think not much better of lawyers, clergymen, and merchants, than it thinks now of politicians.

I have heard of a lawyer, who joined an orthodox society contrary to his own private sentiments, in order to secure some orthodox clients, giving out at the

same time, by way of apology, that he acted out of complaisance to the wishes of his wife; while the wife, no ways ambitious of a reputation for orthodoxy, excused herself in her turn, by pleading the wishes and interests of her husband.

I have heard of a clergyman who was willing to talk about temperance, and even to preach about it, but who refused to *vote* for it, lest he should offend certain persons interested in the rum trade, persons who knew men and the world well enough to know, that preaching without acting is perfectly harmless.

When such manœuvres are practiced by politicians, they are sounded from Dan to Beersheba, as proofs of political wickedness and corruption. In private life they happen every day, but are little known and less talked of. They may serve, however, to convince us that not quite all the drift wood finds its way into politics. Enough is left to kindle comfortable fires in many private chimney corners.

The same meanness, the same self-prostration, which politicians exhibit in the pursuit of popular favor, are exhibited every day by lawyers, by ministers, by merchants, and that too in pursuit of nothing but money, or else of influence and currency in certain little, limited circles, both of them motives as narrow and mean as those from which the politician acts.

As to the apprehension that if friendship to Temperance become a political test, Temperance will be prostituted into a means of selfish advancement, I ask —has not Temperance been so used from the beginning? Have all our Temperance lectures and sermons been delivered out of purely philanthropical motives? Have no thoughts of the popularity to be gained by it ever entered the head of any lecturer, or preacher? And why should they not? Is not public applause, is not the expectation of securing the esteem and admiration of men, a lawful motive of action? Is not that very public opinion to which the politician bows with

such idolatrous reverence, if not an idol to be worshipped, at least a power to be respected, and an influence to be secured? What shall we think of those denouncers of political subserviancy, who themselves, out of nothing but political subserviancy, refuse to carry Temperance to the ballot box? Surely the first stone at the politicians, should not be cast by them.

I know, gentlemen, there are some persons among us,—I hope not any of you,—who nourish a secret but implacable hatred against our whole system of democratical institutions. Afraid to avow their opinions, they vent their spleen, perhaps they gratify their feelings of personal disappointment, in impotent railings against politics, as though politics were something for a wise man to despise, and an honest man to be afraid of.

I, gentlemen, am free to confess that I look at this matter in a different light. Politics decide who shall make, and who shall administer our laws; what those laws shall be, and how they shall be administered. These are great moral questions; questions of the highest importance to the well being of the community; questions on which every man is called to take a part; and questions on which no man will refuse to take a part, who possesses a particle of true manly spirit. That was a wise law of the Greek legislator, which compelled every citizen to take some part or other in every political contention. Politics lead to the highest kind of moral action. Persuasion may do much; example may do much; but Law commands; and those who execute the Law, compel,—the highest act of which man is capable, and never to be exercised but upon the calmest deliberation, and for the solidest reasons. Moral sentiment introduced into law acquires new power and dignity. It acts, not only with the direct force of compulsion, but with an unseen, unfelt influence, it pervades the whole mass of the community; it forms opinion, and modifies actions in the bud.

So far from omitting to carry Temperance into pol-

itics, I would have not only Temperance, but the whole of morality carried there. What wonder that politics have become corrupt, delivered over as they have been to the exclusive management of unprincipled men, every moral consideration being carefully excluded, and that too, strange to say, by the very doctors and teachers of morality? The framers of our constitution seem to have entertained quite a different opinion. They have expressly declared, that "a frequent recurrence to the fundamental principles of the constitution," —and those fundamental principles are assuredly not only political but also moral—" and a constant adherence to those of piety, justice, moderation, temperance, industry and frugality, are absolutely necessary to preserve the advantages of liberty, and to maintain a free government. *The people ought consequently to have a particular attention to all those principles, in the choice of their officers and representatives;* and they have a right to require of their lawgivers and magistrates an exact and constant observance of them, in the formation and execution of the laws necessary for the good administration of the Commonwealth."

Such were the opinions of the framers of our constitution; and upon this matter, gentlemen dissentients, I esteem their opinion more weighty than yours.

The question *how* temperance shall be carried into politics, whether by refusing to vote for candidates known to be hostile to that good cause, or by nominating a separate temperance ticket,—that is a mere question of policy and expediency, to be decided according to circumstances as they happen to exist when an election comes on.

I am far from believing that at the present moment, the formation of a new political party of which the fundamental object shall be the total suppression by law of the trade in intoxicating drinks, is either necessary or desirable. The object in view can be accomplished, I believe, in a shorter and more convenient way, by giving the political parties already in existence

distinctly to understand, that if they wish to secure the votes of temperance men, they must nominate candidates who are known friends to Temperance.

Should that method on trial turn out to be unsuccessful, it will then be time to form a third political party, and with all due deference for the superior discernment of the Rev. Mr. Rogers, I am wholly unable to discover why the "isolated idea" of prohibiting by law the trade in intoxicating drinks and putting a stop to the infinite mischiefs which that trade produces, does not afford altogether as broad and as strong a foundation for a political party as the "isolated idea" of a sub-treasury, a specie currency, a paper currency, free trade, or a tariff. Certain I am that the evils of intemperance, and the benefits to be derived from putting a stop to them, are altogether more plain and palpable, are more level to common apprehension, and come more directly home to our business and our bosoms, our families and our firesides, than all the questions and all the controversies at present existing about currency, tariffs, or banks. If we unite together and act politically, to provide for our mere pecuniary interests, to secure protection to industry and uniformity in values, shall we not unite together and act politically when not only money is at stake, even the very means of subsistence to thousands of starving women and children, but what is worth more than money, what money cannot purchase, domestic peace, family comfort and concord, obedience to the laws, and that clearness of understanding, without which teaching, preaching, and law-making is in vain? This "isolated idea," the Reverend Mr. Rogers thinks, affords too narrow a ground for politics to stand upon. No road suits him, at least no political road, unless it be broad enough for distillers and letters of grog-shops to travel in it also. It is as true, however, in politics as in religion, that narrow is the road and strait is the gate that leads unto life,—so narrow and so strait that even pious theologians sometimes fail to find it, or

finding, are afraid or ashamed to enter it, preferring for the sake of the good company, the broad path that leads down to destruction.

There are, I know, a set of men some of whom have been to some extent interested in the temperance cause, who by nature and position are ultra conservatives, and as such, who look upon all changes with horror. The idea of a political party formed upon moral grounds, is distressing to such men, because such a party cannot exist without producing great changes,—and to these men the very idea of change is distressing.

Nothing but the resistless power of truth, acting upon hearts naturally kind, could have induced men of this temper to give any countenance to the temperance reform, because, however much they may love Temperance, *reform* is a thing which they heartily hate. That such men should fall into great inconsistencies is not to be wondered at.

There is too a certain set of men,—and the cause of Temperance has its share of them,—who so long as the moral improvement of mankind and the exaltation of the mass of the people, is a mere theory, and nothing more, a mere matter of philanthropic talk in drawing-rooms and saloons, in churches and lecture-rooms, none more beneficent, more ready, more zealous than they. But ask them to act, ask them to vote, ask them to face the evil out of doors, ask them to beard the lion in his den; all at once all their valor oozes out at their finger's ends, and these bold champions of philanthropy prove but carpet knights after all.

It is this class of men, so excellent in theory, but so inefficient and incapable in practice, that the master hand of Shakspeare has so admirably portrayed in the character of Hamlet—

> The time is out of joint,—O cursed spite
> That I was ever born to set it right!

That such men should shrink and draw back from the only means efficient to accomplish the great end we have in view, is not remarkable.

There are, too, I doubt not, some good men who have acted as nursing mothers to temperance in its infancy, and who, peradventure, were raised up by providence, to be nurses, and nurses only. It is natural that these should feel a trembling alarm, and should sincerely believe that if the cause of Temperance ever pass from under their brooding wings, it must be certainly lost They flutter and cluck and run hither and thither, with all the agitation of the hen, when she sees her brood of young ducklings taking to the water.

The alarm of these good people is natural, and I know how to respect it. Some allowance is also due to the prejudices of those who out of deep rooted anti-republican feelings, naturally oppose all appeals to the ballot-box; and some consideration must be had for that excessive conservatism, which seems to be the distinguishing trait of those among us who have attained to high stations in church and state, and which incapacitates so many not only from acting, but from speaking, or even thinking. In the old, the men of yesterday, I can pardon a coldness of feeling, an indisposition to act; but for the young, for those who set themselves up to be the men of to-day, men who ought to know better, and who do know better, but who have suffered themselves to be frightened or seduced by the clamors or the arts of the rum-sellers into a public abandonment of the Temperance cause; for such men I have little charity and no respect. I say a public abandonment of the Temperance cause; for I cannot construe into anything less, a request of leave to withdraw their names from the roll of a Temperance Convention, because that Convention had resolved by an almost unanimous vote, that as circumstances now are, it becomes every professed friend of Temperance to show at the polls, that he really believes what all Temperance men say, that the disuse of intoxicating drinks, is of infi-

nitely more importance to the Commonwealth than any pending political considerations whatever. They who cannot vote for Temperance, even now that a law of prohibition is just within our grasp, who cannot even say they think Temperance men ought to vote for Temperance, such men may continue to call themselves friends to the cause, but if friends at all, they seem to be that kind of friends spoken of by a Spanish proverb. Deliver me from such friends. Publicly to make such a declaration, plainly indicates to my mind either a lamentable ignorance of the real nature of our government, and of the actual duties of a man and a citizen, or else a disposition to throw temperance overboard, the instant it requires the least exertion of moral courage, or the least sacrifice of popular favor.

I am, gentlemen, with due respect,

Your obedient servant,

R. HILDRETH.